

Let the Call Be Heard Conference of Associates

By Joan Chittister, OSB

There are several ancient stories that indicate best, perhaps, both the purpose and the spirituality of these groups we newly call "associates"- as if we were in the process of discovering for the very first time the truth holiness has known throughout history: that the purpose of a charism, the very purpose of the gifts of the spirit-is to share them, not to hold them captive to some kind of ecclesiastical elitism.

The first story is from the tales of the desert monastics: one day Abba Arsenius was heard asking an old Egyptian man for advice on something Arsenius was deliberating about. Someone who saw this said to him: "Abba Arsenius! Why is a person like you, who has such great knowledge of Greek and Latin, asking a peasant like this for advice?" And Arsenius replied, "Indeed I have learned the knowledge of Latin and Greek, yet I have not learned even the alphabet of this peasant."

Abba Arsenius knew what as religious communities, as church and as people we have forgotten for centuries: life's is the world's greatest spiritual director and each of us learns something from it.

Each of us carries within us a piece of the truth-but only a piece. A measure of the wisdom toward which we all strive lies in learning the language around us-in hearing the wisdom of the other. It is by absorbing the wisdom of others that we ourselves become wise.

The second story comes from the tales of the Hasidim. A seeker traveled miles every week, the sages say, to learn from the Holy One on the other side of the mountains. "What does the Holy One preach about," some friends asked, "that would possibly cause you to make such a long and arduous journey so often?"

"Preach?" the seeker said. "Why, the Holy One never preaches to me at all."

"Well, then," the friends asked, "What rituals does the Holy One do that are so important to your soul?" And the seeker answered, "The Holy One doesn't do any rituals for me whatsoever." "Well, in that case," the friends persisted, "What potions are you given there that make life holier for you?" And the seeker answered, "I'm not given any potions at all."

"But if the Holy One doesn't preach to you, and the Holy One doesn't do rituals for you, and the Holy One doesn't provide you with potions, why do you go there? And the seeker said, "I go there to watch the Holy One build the fire."

The seeker here knows what every truly spiritual seeker everywhere knows: there are some spiritual truths we come to understand only by seeing them done by another. We understand these truths only by doing what others do who have already gone before us, and who know the value of going this way.

Finally, the Zen masters tell the story of Tetsugen, the goal of whose life was the printing of seven thousand Japanese copies of the Buddha's sutras, which until then were still only available in Chinese. Tetsugen traveled the length and breadth of Japan to collect funds for this project. But after long years of begging, and just as he collected the last of the funds-most of them from the peasants of the country-the river Uji overflowed, and thousands were left homeless. So Tetsugen spent all the money he'd collected for the translation of the scriptures on the homeless.

Then he began the work of raising funds again. But the very year he managed to raise all the money he needed for the second time, an epidemic spread over the country. This time Tetsugen gave the money away to help the suffering.

Finally, once again, he set out on another fundraising journey and twenty years later, sure enough, he'd raised enough money for the third time to see his dream come true: the scriptures would finally be able to be printed in Japanese.

Well, the printing blocks from that first edition of Buddhist sutras into Japanese are still on display at the Obaku monastery in Kyoto. But to this day the Japanese tell their children that Tetsugen actually produced three editions of the sutra and that the first two editions—the care of the homeless, and the comfort of the suffering—are invisible but far superior to the third. Clearly the Zen masters know what we know: witness is the measure of the spirituality we profess. What we do because of what we say we believe is the real mark of genuine spirituality.

From the desert master who listened to the laity to the seeker who recognized holiness of life in the sheer reverent dailiness of the holy, to Tetsugen who knew that no spiritual book is equal to one spiritual act, the link between deep spiritual development and a profound spiritual life has been a constant. The ancients are clear: there is a common bond between conscious carriers of the great spiritual traditions and seekers of the spiritual life in every age that is both necessary and empowering. One enlightens the other. One energizes the other. One empowers the other. The tradition enlightens the time, yes, but seekers reenergize a tradition, as well.

Point: Religious and associates need one another. Why? Because true companions make possible the growth of the other, that's why.

The questions today, then, are simple ones:

1. Why do you exist?
2. Where did you come from?
3. Who are you?
4. What must you do?

"Why do you exist?" is a question of purpose. "Associate" programs—by whatever name they have been called through time— "Oblates", a Benedictine term as old as the sixth century; "Confraters" in medieval monasteries; the lay preacher "tertiaries" of thirteenth century France; Franciscan, Dominican and Carmelite "Third Orders" of the later Middle Ages; or groups like the Jesuit volunteers, the Mercy Corps, and Maryknoll Lay Missioners of today—are simply meant to give new life, new space, new stretch to the charisms of the spirit and the religious congregations whose task it is to proctor their treasures for the rest of the world.

"Where did you come from?" is a question of legitimacy that goes back to the roots of the church and the tradition itself. Paul is very clear about it in Corinthians: "To each one," he teaches, "the manifestation of the spirit is given for the common good to one is given wisdom, to another knowledge, to one faith, to another healing, to one power, to another prophecy... all these are the work of one and the same spirit and given to each one as the spirit determines" (1 Cor. 12: 3) for the sake of the body, the whole!

No doubt about it: Charisms are gifts given to each one of us for the sake of the whole church, and so they must be given away for the sake of the whole church! The day we keep our charism to ourselves, that very day the charism dies in us and the spirit goes seeking for softer sand through which to run.

Clearly, the spiritual channel of religious charisms or gifts is meant to be an unbroken one—through the keepers of the wells of those traditions, the religious congregations themselves, to the keepers of the byways of the world, the associate members who live in the vortex of it, and it has clearly been forever thus.

Scripture itself is full of companionship models of spirituality: Ruth and Naomi; Judith and her maidservant; Paul and Timothy; Elisha and Elija. In every case it is the blend of differences, the

meld of diverse gifts that makes possible the final miracle of faith. In every case it is the linking of unlike life experiences through the binding of common commitments that gives new life to the faith. In every case it is the listening, the learning, and the loving attachment of their spirits, that takes two weaknesses and makes them strong together. In every case, these companions, who come from different perspectives in life and spirit, make it possible for them to do together what neither of them could possibly do alone.

Thanks to Ruth -- the Moabite, the foreigner, the outsider-Naomi, the Israelite, can return to Bethlehem. Confident of support now, Naomi is able to complete her part in the economy of salvation when, through her lineage, Obed, grandfather of King David (and so ancestor of the Jesus who fulfills the word of the prophets) is brought to birth by the foreigner Ruth. The life of each of them comes to fullness and the word of God becomes flesh because of them then -- just as it does because of religious communities and associates today.

Thanks to her maidservant who risks her own life to accompany her, Judith ran go in disguise to the tent of Holofernes. Judith and her maidservant, a pair of indomitable women, do what women are not supposed to be able to do because each uses her gift to double the power of the other. Together, they plot the doom of the one who holds Israel under siege. Together they saved the city from the sure destruction which its practical, political and frightened officials were unable to avert. Religious and associates must do the same today for our cities under siege.

Thanks to the prophet Elija, Elisha is recognized -- strange as he may seem to be for the task, remote as he may be from the prophetic tradition --as the one who will carry on the prophetic work itself and so redeem the conscience of Israel.

Elija, the established one, recognizes in Elisha, the timid one, another voice of God and gives it stage for its own message. You and I must do that same thing for one another, and so for the voiceless of our time.

Thanks to Paul himself who recognized in Timothy's youth and his Greek ancestry the bridge he himself needed to preach Jesus to a whole new non-Jewish population, the work of the early church was able to thrive in regions far beyond the sound of Paul's own voice.

Now we -- you and I -- must raise our voices together -- you in your world, we in ours -where the gospel is seldom heard. It was Jesus himself who said to many, "Come and see.... take and eat" and then sent them out together- no apostles in sight -- to share the bread of their lives, to live with one heart and one mind, to be the sign of his ongoing resurrection, to be the disciples of his own life.

Indeed, associate programs share a proud history, a broad scope. They also embody a bold, bold theology. They demonstrate in a period of crippling clericalism and a closed ecclesiology that the charisms of Jesus which the church holds in trust- those personifications in us of the ongoing spirit of Jesus- the spirit of mercy, the spirit of contemplation, the spirit of love, the spirit of truth, the spirit of prophecy, the spirit of vision and courage and crucifixion for justice' sake- all the gifts of which Paul speaks are not for the keeping by a few. There are not some of us who are holy and some of us not! There are not some of us who embody the gifts of the spirit and some of us who do not. There are not some of us who are gift to the church and some of us who are not.

"Who are you?" is a question of identity and the answer to that question is that you are the gift that is meant to be exactly who we are but in different form. You and we -- we and you -- are all gifts meant to be blessed and broken, meant to be taken for food by those who are hungry for them, meant to be consumed by the spirits of those who have no spirit, meant to be messengers, models and makers of a whole new world wherever we are.

Indeed, the charisms of Jesus that the spirit gives to each of us are not for sequestering by professional, religious types. The charisms of Jesus the preacher, the healer, the wonder worker, the gatherer of nations are preserved to this day by the workings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of seekers everywhere, in the lives of religious everywhere. They were made visible in the healing work of religious congregations when sickness was considered a punishment for sin, and to be diseased meant to be well enough left alone to die in ignominy. They were made visible in the justice concerns of religious congregations when oppression and slavery were thought to be God's will. They were made visible in powerful prayerfulness in times when consciousness of the gentle and loving face of God, present and compassionate, was least apparent among us.

They were made visible in the prophetic works of religious congregations when nations sinned in the name of God and called it "Christianization" and the church itself strayed from the gospel and called it "orthodoxy." And those charisms live in each of them still are meant to be shared, to be spent, to be strewed recklessly through the body of Christ, not held captive to some kind of semi-clericalized corps of ecclesiastical aristocracy. More than that, they are the essence, the mark, the message of the life of Jesus, the part of the Christian mystery still being accomplished this time through us. The charisms of the spirit are alive, in other words. They go on going on-as Jesus goes on going on.

Charisms are not then ever complete. They are not frozen in time. They are not fixed and they are not static, stagnant and stock-still. What you feel in your heart today about justice and mercy and prophetic witness and union with God is the same impulse that drove Jesus 2000 years ago.

Charisms leap with life. They never die. They are the spiritual energy of every moment; they are the electricity that powers every good. They are that surge in you, that surety in me, that we ride on a river of grace that is still and deep, raging and new, ancient and immediate in every time, in every one, in every moment of our lives. They are dynamic, unfolding, and as necessarily new today as they were in the soul of Benedict of Nursia, Francis of Assisi, Dominic and Ignatius, Vincent DePaul and Louise DeMarillac, Jean Medaille and Mother St. John Fontbonne, Sophie Barat and Philippine Duchesne, Mary Ward, Mother McCauley and Benedicta Riepp.

Charism is obviously a living, growing thing. It is the grace of gifts ancient and passed on to us anew. It is the grace of gifts given now and passed on by us to you. Charism is the grace of gifts ongoing and passed on by you to a wider world for times to come.

Charism, then, must constantly be rediscovered and constantly re-expressed. Charism is always ripe but always in bloom again, always finished for one age and people, yes, but always starting over again in another. Charism is like every living part- tendril, seed, tree, branch, flower and fruit of the spiritual life- that grows through time and then, through you and me, grows again.

Charism is the fig tree that blooms in every season; it is the fireworks of the fourth of July of grace and God and Jesus! No one and nothing encapsulates the whole life of Jesus. No one embodies all the gifts of Jesus at one time: Only Jesus is Jesus. But the gifts of the life of Jesus, we're told in I Corinthians, remain, nevertheless, because the spirit gives them now to us as carriers of these religious traditions and also to you as bearers of them anew.

As a result, some of us have one gift and some of us have another gift and together we have a gift that is greater than either of us and greater than both of us separately and alone. And together we make it visible in new ways. And together we make it vocal again in the new language of a new time. And therein lays the glory of the associate programs that are springing up in the church again from religious order to religious order, from coast to coast, from continent to continent, everywhere.

It is the associate programs of religious orders that are becoming tentacles of the spirit in the nucleus of the world, a veritable critical mass of new life.... and new hope and new expressions of Jesus alive in us.

There are associates everywhere being the charism of their order: they are preaching peace in a country that spends more money on human destruction than on human development. They are doing justice in a world that provides its CEO's the same salaries every 90 minutes as their employees make in one year. One hundred times the salaries of the workers who make their money for them! They are being mercy in the prisons that kill killers to show everybody that killing is wrong, despite the fact that 1 out of 7-nearly 15%- of convicted killers are innocent. They are demanding equality for women who are invisible even in churches who say their model is Jesus, and women who are ignored by the sexist systems that suck up their lives by putting on their backs twice the burdens and little more than half the pay.

Associates are becoming a new kind of people in the midst of the mess of violence and greed, oppression and ruthless, self-satisfying power. A people whose weapon is truth and whose strength is fearlessness. In associates the best of the charisms live on.

The questions, then, are real: to what table and to what feast are we all called in common? What are the gifts given there? And finally, what are the challenges facing each of us as we share this one cup, this one bread together?

"What must we do?" is the question of mission and meaning. It requires a new answer of both religious congregations and of associates themselves if charism is really what we are all about. Associate programs have a purpose and a place in the contemporary church that is gift to the entire church.

First, associate programs model a whole church, a church that is wholly ministering, wholly open, wholly renewed- in the very heart of a church become over time too male, too clerical, and too distant from the people of God.

When professed members of a canonical congregation merge their lives and their work, their spiritual wisdom and their public witness, their decision-making and the deepest part of their concerns with the laity who surround them, then the church itself becomes new again. In the spirit of the Jesus who walked with women, talked with Samaritans, and contested with the keepers of the synagogue, associate programs lift up the gates that have divided us from ourselves to the detriment of both of us.

Associate programs make the integration of lay life and religious life obvious, yes, but they do more than that. They give the lie to the notion that one state is "higher" than another. They make evident the inherent holiness of each. They make evident that each of us is on the way to the same God- the only difference in our journeys is the way we choose to get there.

Associate programs demonstrate what DeVinci's "Last Supper-with its all-male, apostolic, privatized version of Jesus' Eucharistic theology did not - but which Bohdan Piasecki's new print of men, women and children eating together at the feast makes plain: the table to which Jesus calls us is a table of men and women, of apostles and disciples, of young and old, all sharing the same meal, all called to the same cup, and all of them participants in the theological development of the early Christian community. They remind us of the circle of Jesus that takes unlike people in but which, over the centuries, became a pious pyramid designed to keep most people down and out.

Associate programs dispel the image of exclusivity that makes spirituality the purview of a private club of cognoscenti of special people-people specifically privileged, specifically gendered, supposedly more knowledgeable, specially recognized, specifically sexual who define its limits and confine its rewards to themselves.

Finally, associate programs enable lay members and religious congregations to strengthen the gifts of the other and to learn from the gifts of the other at the same time. Associates bring to a congregation the gift of immersion in another whole dimension of life- with all its insights, all its

understandings, all its muddy, complex complications and its cry for our awareness, our involvement, our voice. Religious bring to associates the lived experience of a long-standing spiritual tradition that has withstood the test of time over centuries of challenge, stabilized whole layers of people in the midst of grave dangers and given direction to whole bodies of seekers at times of great darkness.

In the fifth century, when the Roman Empire broke down and Europe lay in ruin, Benedictinism was there to give spiritual meaning, social organization and human community across all social strata - rich, poor, slave, free, Roman citizen, foreign immigrant - to a people left without either political center or spiritual guidance, a sense of meaning or of social bondedness.

When the emerging mercantile society began to consume the lives of the poor for the sake of a new economic system that robbed the poor of land and paid nothing for their labor, the mendicants emerged, simple, poor and dependent only on God, to remind people of other, deeper, longer-lasting values.

When religion failed itself and spawned division instead of peace, Ignatius of Loyola brought spiritual discernment where, until that time, little other than institutional disciplines had been. When family industries broke down, and family farms disappeared, when the new industrialization herded men into factories giving men money but women nothing, Mother McCauley -- and hundreds of religious founders like her -- began to provide women, too, with the education, and the child care, and the health care and the status their lives would depend on in coming generations.

It is the depth of those spiritual traditions, the courage of those spiritual histories, the commitment of those religious figures, the faith of those religious women, the spiritual profundity of those religious currents, that religious communities hold in trust for the associates who seek them out.

How can we fail then, if we are truly providing "associate programs" - if we are truly seeking to be the spiritual tradition we treasure, to form justice-seeking people, strong and independent women, holy and spiritual laity, broad and multi-cultural communities for our own time? How can we as religious hide in our spiritual jacuzzis, our pious spas and possibly imagine that we carry the charisms of those before us?

Associate programs are not simply meant for us to strengthen one another's special gifts but to learn from them ourselves as well. Lay associates must learn the pervasive power of age-old traditions for the quality of life today. Religious, who are accustomed to the security of group projects, must learn the breath-taking impact of the kind of independent and individual actions that lay associates in their isolated lives risk every day, take for granted every day, brave without end every day as they face the hostile, the indifferent and the scornful alone every day with prayer for peace, justice, equality, community. We preach - but they confront!

We must look to one another for the wisdom of experience each of us brings to the table from a different part of life, another facet of living, a completely distinct perspective on being Christian, on being whole. There are challenges, of course: it is an adjustment period for us all. In the first place, religious are learning to learn from the laity. They are coming to a sense of a wisdom beyond the conventional.

Religious are also rediscovering their own role to pass on a spiritual tradition as well as a set of institutional ministries. They are discovering that with the open door that characterized their foundresses goes their own sense of perfect privacy and antiseptic control of circumstances and physical environments, and regular schedules and sanctifying seclusion.

Religious are learning that life itself is not neat and that "neat" can be a trap that swallows us into the middle of ourselves where nothing grows but narcissism. Religious are finding that what lay women lack most is space. They need space for the quiet that a clinging child does not give for one

moment a day. They need space to talk about their own dreams and hopes and questions, and they need someone to talk to. They need connectedness- a sense of being part of something larger than themselves, something that enables them to know that on the wide stage of the planet, they, too, count on the issues that make the gospel real and the beatitudes true and the resurrection possible for everyone.

Religious are finding out that lay men need a sanctuary, too, where being macho and tough, where inflicting pain and taking pain are not the real measure of a man. They are coming to realize that lay men need a place where the spiritual life is nurtured in them, not derided.

Religious are beginning to understand that there are lay men out there who want to learn from the wisdom of women for whom force and power, money and profit are not the goals of life. They are coming to understand that both women and men need to be companioned into the soup kitchens and peace vigils and social justice groups that confront the state on behalf of the poor and challenge the church on behalf of women, and contradict the powers that chain the oppressed, and renew the world with the message of the Christ. Men need, most of all, an opportunity to make a faith-journey that is regular and deep and tried and true, and they need someone to walk the journey with them: To teach them the way, to point out the path, to monitor the going, to applaud the efforts, and care about both them and the tradition enough to walk the way with them.

Associate programs are not this decade's answer to ladies aid societies or convent guilds or alumnae programs or community "auxiliaries." Associate programs are the backbone, the circle, the life design and the support that are so rare in a world of isolates. They are the hope that in this century, too, the life and values and spiritualities known to some to have given depth and breadth, courage and character, faith and ferment, gospel and good news from century to century can be born in us again, anew and always.

The poor have never been poorer, children have never been needier in this richest of all countries. If our associate programs are to be authentic, let there be associates with the spirituality of Vincent DePaul and Francis DeSales who will carry these values to city hall and congress, to corporate offices and city streets.

In this most violent of countries, the blood of our children runs in our streets because we have taught them violence well. If our associates programs are to be authentic, let there be associates with the peacemaking charisma of a Benedict of Nursia and Francis of Assisi who put down weapons in order "to do battle for Christ the King." In this most sexist of worlds where women to this day are raped, beaten, bought and sold, left to face widowhood without adequate resources, invisible in all the decision-making arenas of the church, deprived of both equal pay and meaningful promotions, if our associate programs are to be authentic, let there be associates with the spirituality of a Mother McCauley, Mary Ward, Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena who call the men of the world to conscience and accountability in both church and state, both state and church.

Associate programs are not meant to be pious additions to a string of private devotions.

We are at a common table, you and I, called the church. We share a common feast, called the last supper of the Lord. We bear a common responsibility to bring that bread of life to every dying thing we see. We owe to the world now the cup of blood that is our own. We are today's companions on the way and the keepers of great spiritual traditions, all of which were born in times of stress and discord, merciless war and death, spiritual poverty and physical pain, rampant oppression and great human need.

This is not a time to play church, to mistake the great spiritual traditions of history for spiritual massage parlors. Now is the time to carry these charisms back into a world that need them again so badly.

Let us then, with Ruth and Naomi, Elisha and Elija, Timothy and Paul, Judith and her maidservant, companion one another again to prophetic truth, to gospel voice, to brave witness, to risk and new life everywhere.

Let us, in other words, "Come to the table, come to the feast." Let us, in other words, be true to the traditions we hold in common.

Once up a time, a disciple asked the Holy One, "Holy One, What is the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?" And the Holy One said, "When you have knowledge, you use a torch to show the way. When you are enlightened, you become the torch."

Where do you come from? You come from the heart of the Spirit. Who are you? You are gifts given by God for today.

Why do you exist? You are to embody and extend the charisms or gifts of the spirit long embedded in the great spiritual religious traditions in new and even richer ways. You exist for one reason, and one reason only: to become, like the great religious before you, the blazing, flaming, searing torch to others that you are really meant to be, that the world really needs now while an old age is dying and a new one is groaning to bring new life.